Committee on Resources

Subcommittee on National Parks and Public Lands

Testimony

STATEMENT OF DAVID F. TRAYNHAM, ASSISTANT ADMINISTRATOR FOR POLICY, PLANNING, AND INTERNATIONAL AVIATION, FEDERAL AVIATION ADMINISTRATION, BEFORE THE HOUSE COMMITTEE ON RESOURCES, SUBCOMMITTEE ON NATIONAL PARKS AND PUBLIC LANDS, ON THE NATIONAL PARK SERVICE'S NEW METHODOLOGY TO EVALUATE THE ACHIEVEMENT OF NATURAL QUIET RESTORATION STANDARDS IN GRAND CANYON NATIONAL PARK. MAY 25, 1999

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee:It is a pleasure to appear before you today to discuss the Federal Aviation Administration's (FAA) role in working with the National Park Service (NPS) to achieve the substantial restoration of natural quiet in Grand Canyon National Park (GCNP). I would like to express our appreciation for your continued leadership concerning national park overflights and reiterate our commitment to working with NPS and the Congress to reduce the impact of aircraft overflights on our national parks. My testimony today will focus on FAA's part in using the revised NPS methodology to achieve statutorily required restoration of natural quiet.

This Administration has committed significant time and effort to developing specific plans to restore natural quiet to the GCNP and to formulating a national policy and process to manage aircraft overflights over national parks across the country. In developing this policy, the Administration has taken care to balance the interests of the numerous groups affected by rules concerning overflights. Many park visitors and those whose duty it is to preserve park resources are concerned about aircraft noise over park lands. Those charged with aviation safety are concerned about effectively managing the airspace. Those who provide access to park resources from the air offer a unique and unparalleled way to view the parks, and are, of course, interested in continuing these operations. And, in the case of western parks especially, Native American cultural and historical properties are affected by flights over or near park land.

We have worked closely with NPS over the past few years to balance these various interests within the parameters of each of our specific mandates and jurisdictions, cooperatively developing policies, rules, and processes that preserve, to the extent practicable, the natural resources without compromising aviation safety. The FAA and NPS have two distinct missions: Federal law and Congressional policy mandate that the authority to control air traffic over our nation's airspace resides solely with the FAA, while the NPS is charged with the management of the natural and cultural resources and values of the national park system. I believe that we have proven over the past few years that although these missions are separate and distinct, they are not necessarily incompatible.

Together, we have developed a process to manage the impact of aircraft overflights to the national park system: NPS sets standards for noise levels in our national parks and the FAA integrates these standards into our regulation of aircraft and airspace. Within this procedure, NPS consults with the FAA on developing further actions to aid the substantial restoration of natural quiet, as well as planning for the development of a comprehensive noise management plan for air tour operations over GCNP. For our part, the FAA offers advice and expertise on aircraft noise. This system has proven effective both in preserving our distinct missions and in progressing steadily towards the goal of substantially restoring natural quiet over GCNP.

As you know, NPS has made a number of revisions to its noise standards and policies. In particular, in January of this year, the NPS published its new "Dual Noise Standard" in the Federal Register, 64 Fed. Reg. 3969 (January 26, 1999), as the new basis for evaluating restoration of natural quiet in the GCNP. The new standard reflects whether a person is actively listening for aircraft or not, and other factors based on land

use, visitor activity, and geography. In addition, as NPS Deputy Director Lowey has testified, the NPS has modified the use of average natural ambient sound levels for a noise impact threshold with a two-zone system, one for higher noise sensitivity and one for lower noise sensitivity. This will more precisely reflect the acoustic conditions of the park.

The FAA plans to issue a Notice of Proposed Rulemaking (NPRM) soon that will modify existing regulations governing aircraft flights over the GCNP. The NPRM will reflect these changes in the NPS policies. It will make use of the FAA's standard computer methodology for assessing and predicting aircraft noise impacts, the Integrated Noise Model (INM). To put it simply, the INM is a computer program that predicts aircraft noise exposure. That is, when certain types of information are input into the program, such as the number of flights during a day and the types of planes making those flights, the INM can produce information on the noise that those flights will generate.

The FAA has continually refined and updated the INM's system capabilities, aircraft noise and performance data, and computer technology, to reflect advances in acoustic science and the accurate evaluation of unique regional environments. In line with this, the FAA produced a modified version of the INM to provide specific data appropriate to aircraft noise conditions in the GCNP. This data will then be used to assess the noise exposure implications of the actions proposed in the upcoming NPRM.

The FAA uses INM because of: (1) its widespread scientific acceptance; (2) its use of methodology that conforms to industry and international standards; (3) its measurement-derived noise and performance data; (4) its ability to calculate noise exposure over varying terrain elevation; and (5) its adaptability and reliability for assessing a variety of situations, including noise impacts on park lands. This is the type of computer modeling that supports the assessment of land use compatibility and the restoration of natural quiet. The INM uses specific measures of noise for these assessments. The data is analyzed to determine what changes may be needed to air traffic management in order to achieve particular goals in noise management.

At this juncture, the FAA has not yet completed our analysis, and therefore, it is premature to discuss the specific details of the upcoming NPRM. However, the FAA is committed to promulgating fair and equitable rules regarding aircraft operations. And, as always, our highest priority is aviation safety. Our NPRM will ensure the highest level of aviation safety possible while following the NPS' guidelines, policies, and standards for achieving the substantial restoration of natural quiet in the GCNP and other national park lands.

We believe that together the NPS and the FAA are well on the way to achieving our common goal of substantial restoration of natural quiet in the GCNP and other national parks, without eliminating safe access by air. It has been and will continue to be our policy, in managing the navigable airspace over these natural treasures, to exercise leadership in achieving an appropriate balance between efficiency, technological practicability, and environmental concerns, while maintaining the highest level of safety.

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you this morning. This concludes my prepared statement, Mr. Chairman, and I would be pleased to answer any questions you and members of the Committee may have.

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